

The concentration of Broadcast ownership is a MUCH greater threat to democracy and the cherished principles on which this country was founded -- principles we still aspire to -- than Al Queda or any terrorist organization.

The ownership regulations should be tightened not relaxed even further.

Captive Audience

Molly Ivins is the former editor of the liberal monthly The Texas Observer. She is also author of the bestselling book, Molly Ivins Can't Say That Can She?.

This is a gross scandal. The Center for Public Integrity has a stunning study out on the concentration of ownership in telecommunications. The even more stunning news is that the Federal Communications Commission, which theoretically represents you and me, is about to make all of it even worse. And behind this betrayal of the public trust is nothing but rotten, old-fashioned corruption. It's the old free-trip-to-Vegas ploy, on a grand scale.

The Public Integrity people examined the travel records of FCC employees and found that they have accepted 2,500 trips, costing nearly \$2.8 million over the past eight years, paid for by the telecommunications and broadcast industries, which are, theoretically, "regulated" by the FCC. The industry-paid travel is on top of about \$2 million a year in official travel paid for by taxpayers.

According to the center, FCC commissioners and agency staffers attended hundreds of conventions, conferences and other events all over the world, including Paris, Hong Kong and Rio de Janeiro. They were put up at luxury hotels such as the Bellagio in Las Vegas and ferried about by limo. Vegas was the top destination -- 330 trips -- New Orleans second with 173, then New York at 102 and London with 98 trips. Why London, you may ask. Well, do ask.

So here's the result of our regulators getting all these nice freebies where they schmooze with the industry guys. The three largest local phone companies control 83 percent of home telephone lines. The two top long-distance carriers control 67 percent of that market. The four biggest cellular phone companies have 64 percent of the wireless market.

The five largest cable companies pipe programming to 74 percent of the cable subscribers nationwide.

The FCC is what is known in government circles as a "captive agency." It has been captured by the industry it is supposed to regulate. Those who work at captive agencies come to identify with their industry and believe their function is to service it, not regulate it.

The center also found that the FCC increasingly relies on industry-generated data to justify sweeping deregulation proposals. Great, it doesn't even have its own numbers.

FCC Chairman Michael ("The free market is my religion") Powell is about to pass yet another giveaway to the country's biggest media conglomerates. There will be another enormous wave of media consolidation. On June 2, the FCC will vote to end long-established rules on multiple ownership.

The big players are Rupert Murdoch's News Corp./Fox, General Electric/NBC, Viacom/CBS, Disney/ABC and the Tribune Corp. You will notice that television is not giving this story, with its enormous impact, any coverage at all, and many newspapers have done no better. (William Safire of The New York Times is a noble exception.)

These are public airwaves. They are owned by us, we the people. Columbia Journalism Review's Neil Hickey reports in "Power Shift" that at public hearings all over the country, there has been a huge outpouring of public concern and anxiety about what is happening. More and more people are speaking out, and the FCC's public reaction counts are completely negative, yet it goes right on doing it, as though the citizens are nothing.

You can register your protest before June 2 by going to www.mediareform.net, or phoning or faxing the agency. But why should you bother, especially if they're not going to pay attention anyway?

Look at what has already happened to radio. Many of the stations you listen to will not break into their programming to tell you if a tornado is headed directly for your town, or to warn you if there's a flash flood on the west side or that a toxic chemical truck has turned over near you. That's because there is no one at your radio station.

You think it's a local station because a voice with your local regional accent announces the county fair attractions for next weekend and such. But that voice is an actress in Los Angeles. She reads the announcement there, and then it is inserted digitally into the programming, which is the same across the country -- generic rock, oldies, country, whatever.

When you get this degree of concentration in the news media, the idea of a free press becomes a joke. Liberals and conservatives alike have a common interest in preventing the huge media conglomerates from getting even bigger. We must keep independent voices alive.

This is worth raising hell about. Call your congressman, too, because, even at captive agencies, when the pols who write the budgets speak, the agencies listen. And the pols listen when the people get stirred up enough. Let's see a little citizenly responsibility from all you patriots out there. You

need to do more than sing, "I'm Proud to Be an American" to
keep this country free.